Stitches

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Stitches

by Nerve_Itch

Summary

Will is suffering – and that is absolutely at Hannibal's behest. The monster and the man both delight in anguish in its many forms.
But, Will is also alive. In one version of events, this is an equation of simple sadism; Will is alive, because to dispose of him too quickly would be a waste.
In another version of events, he is alive because he still has value. In which case, what remains is to prove it.

Set near the events of S1, in which Will finds out.

Notes

Hello!
If you are hoping for this story to provide you with a moral compass, please click away now as this is emphatically not what it was written for.
If you are here because Will Graham in distress is very much your jam, please, read on.

See the end of the work for more notes

1

1 -

“They will be looking for you for quite some time, I imagine.”

Will nods his acceptance, as far as the barbs across his neck allow it. One catches at his throat – no sharper than a drawing pin, not enough to bleed him. Not yet.

Hannibal does not tell Will this as reassurance. He means it with the absolute conviction of one who knows that any search will be fruitless.

Will is solid and present before Hannibal now, yet he is absent from the rest of the world. To them, he now exists only in APBs, sombre words, articles, and cautionary tales.

“They believe you to be the copycat,” Hannibal continues, swiping a cloth over a pair of bolt cutters and placing them back in a drawer behind him. “So caught up in the madness of those you chased, that you fell prey to their very temptations.”

Temptation was never the issue, Will wants to say. Not for the others, and not for Hannibal. They are more than gluttons of their trade. Instead, the words, all of his words, remain stuck in his teeth. They swell beneath his tongue, laid flat in his mouth by the wire running double-width against it. To speak would be to mutilate himself. Being framed seems to be the least of his concerns, now. He tries instead to speak something altogether shorter, but no less painful.

“My dogs” Will tries, the sound guttural and clogged without consonants. Metal scrapes the roof of his mouth.

“You left the doors open for them when you fled,” Hannibal assures Will, folding away a pair of thick mesh gloves. “And I doubt they will have eaten everything you fed them, before they are found.”

Will is soothed by this new narrative for a moment, and then he sees it; a glint of teeth in Hannibal’s thin smile. He blames the residue of drugs – opiates? Anaesthetics? – for not suspecting the worst immediately. Something in his stomach plummets further into dread. He’d long believed himself inured to shock, and yet. The animals had no place in this world. *What did you feed them?* The images of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, the girls he ate all resurrected in a kaleidoscopic assembly of wide-eyed young women, reduced to meat. So, Will is to become Hobbs. The question of *whose remains* is obscured by a swelling nausea.

Hannibal says nothing for a moment, eyeing Will with something akin to curiosity, and amusement. His default, Will supposes. He feels it, then; the first rush of fury, of rage – with more clarity than any that preceded it. Moreso than when he learned of Hannibal’s expertly concealed copycat tableaus, even when his knowledge that Hannibal and the Chesapeake

Ripper were the same beast manifested with gruesome clarity, and infinitely more than when he learned of Abigail's deeds against Nick Boyle, against all those other girls.

Will learns, then, how meticulously he has been tethered into place, as literally as metaphorically. The curls and points of each wire barb catch and snag across his cotton shirt, and then his skin, and against the bones of his wrists, ankles, knees. The pain is bright and immediate.

Hannibal tilts his head sideways, as though to better study where any tempting spots of red may have bloomed.

"Nothing you left out for them would bring them harm," Hannibal says, resuming wiping down the metal worktop until his reflection shines back in sharp relief. "You saved the smallest pieces for your fishing lures."

Defeat sits heavy on Will's skin. Knowing – learning – all that he has about Hannibal should have equipped him better for this. He should have gone to Jack. Should have carried a gun to Hannibal's house. He should have doubted – as he has with everyone who'd come before Hannibal – that any bond of trust could have prevented this. To imagine that he was interesting, or valuable enough, to Hannibal. Except this isn't Hannibal; this is the Chesapeake Ripper, the copycat, the creature forever lingering just out of view. The Ripper has no use for friends.

Will wonders how many days his death will take, and if the method will vary, or whether he'll simply be left to poke himself to death against the ribbons of wire holding him upright, dehydrated and starved in Hannibal's basement.

"I imagine you must be very concerned right now," Hannibal offers as a profound understatement, "and that this cannot be comfortable for you."

Will finds that despite his lack of available movement, he is still able to raise an eyebrow.

Hannibal leans in close, the shape of him distorting as Will fights the instinct that he is about to be swallowed whole. There's a rustling of plastic, of pouches, of unknown things in Will's peripheral vision that he suspects are in place to keep him, what, alive? Functioning? Perhaps trapped in the precise balance between conscious lucidity and medicated acquiescence that Hannibal requires of him. He considers, hopes for one short moment, that this is all a fiction created by his mind. That he is merely overwhelmed by his work and will wake with a headache and sweat-soaked sheets, ready to take his troubles to Hannibal to work through them in cryptic words and metaphors. A breath in his ear interrupts the fantasy, and he flinches. Enough to pull against the wire, and he's back in his grim reality.

"When your thoughts turn in on themselves, perhaps you can reassure yourself," Hannibal says, his voice hot and thick. "When Jack discovers your crimes, he will no longer be compelled to pursue Abigail for hers."

Satisfied with his work, Hannibal ascends the stairs from the basement, leaving Will to his thoughts in the dark.

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2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2 -

Will has no concept of time. The light only changes with Hannibal; when he enters the basement, he's illuminated, and the sharp edges of tables and drawers glint at him with promises of what is yet to come. When Hannibal leaves, after fussing with tubes and liquids and at least twice, a needle, it's dark. Consciousness waxes and wanes through exhaustion, drugs, and the escalation of jagged tears of skin. At times, Will hears music. Other times, he can make out the soft scratching of pencil on paper.

Lucidity comes in pinpricks, then in scratches, and then in vivid bursts and blooms through the timeless dark. Will is awake. And with consciousness, comes pain. It helps, he thinks. Reminds him of where he is, and of who put him here.

He feels like an ornament. A sculptured tribute to Hannibal's innate sadism, every raw and screaming part of him skewered in place for gentle entertainment. Hannibal left him here, knowing that cramps would tighten the muscles of his legs into burning knots, that pins and needles would rubberise his toes, his fingers, and that his sides would burn with the weight of holding himself up, and of being held. That each time he breathes too deep, the wall of his chest realigns to each barb and skewers the skin afresh. Hannibal knows, precisely, what Will is experiencing right now, and yet has not even deigned to watch.

It's a test, then. The wire, the temptation towards anger and freedom almost tangible if he could only pull himself free. He tries, a concerted straining against the wire, and immediately regrets it when fresh nerves spring to life and his shirt and boxers dampen with fresh blood and sweat. Perhaps, there are other ways to tear himself free.

In one of the darkened, conscious moments, Will becomes dimly aware that the metal snagging his teeth and tongue has gone. He tries speaking to the dark and finds his mouth too dry and his tongue feeling like a bruise. He closes his eyes and thinks of streams.

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The lights come on brighter this time, in multiples. Will is awake, fully and resentfully. His skin is a crust of congealed wounds and his body is a screaming ache. Hannibal is wearing a jumper and dark trousers – almost casual – except the entire outfit appears wrapped in plastic.

Well. Shit.

“Good morning, Will,” Hannibal says with mild cheer, as though time continues to have meaning.

“Morning,” Will offers, except his tongue gets stuck behind his too-dry teeth.

Hannibal presses a glass against Will’s lower lip and tilts, until fresh cold water floods his mouth. He swallows like he’s forgotten how to, water spilling over his jaw and splashing his shoulders.

“I was hoping we might talk,” Hannibal says pleasantly.

Will wants to scream before he can speak, but the strength for it is lacking. More pressingly, Hannibal values decorum, and he must remain valuable.

“Of course,” Will says, voice thick and rasping. He tries for a smile, though his mouth still feels torn.

Hannibal pulls a chair – some heavy formation of wood and metal – to Will’s side.

“I imagine you’ve had time to distil your thoughts and urges to their most potent strengths by now. Tell me, Will. What would you like to happen next?”

Will takes a moment to dilute some of those potent thoughts before speaking, watching as Hannibal removes the bolt cutters from their drawer, then the gloves, and then a slew of equipment that seems to span medical and torturous in nature.

“A hot bath.”

Hannibal’s expression is neutral, and Will finds himself wanting to scrabble for approval, mirth, horror – anything, really – to broach those features.

“I agree,” Hannibal says gently. “You smell terrible.”

Hannibal puts the wire mesh gloves on over the plastic, pulling them up to his elbows and Will wonders if Hannibal has a puncture repair kit for this outfit.

“I don’t,” Will tells Hannibal with all the conviction he can muster. “Not to you.”

Hannibal moves behind Will with the bolt cutters, denying Will the satisfaction of any reaction in his immutable face. The first coils of wire are cut free of Will’s ankles. His silence prompts Will further.

“To you,” Will continues, as a prong of metal is pulled from the meat of his calf, “I smell like…like conquest. Rage and subjugation.” He bites back a whimper as the next prong is pulled from his thigh; “Like concentrated pain. I’m basically catnip to you right now.”

Hannibal pulls at the next few coils of the barbed wire, careful to fold them and keep them away from the creak of his plastic suiting. Less careful to spare the flesh they drag against

before he pulls them free. Will's breath comes out in hisses, through gritted teeth, punctuated by an occasional unwilling gasp.

"Indeed," Hannibal agrees. "Though a bath would still be welcome." He rests a heavy gloved hand across Will's bound wrists, enough pressure applied to summon tears to Will's eyes at the awakening of nerves long dormant. "What else, Will?"

There are answers that Hannibal may want to hear, and there are many things he won't. Pleading would be boring to him, and so is being a sycophant. Will understands the concept of captor bonding, but the concept seems weak when stacked against Hannibal. He's too low on sleep, on nerves, to lie.

A deep, shaking breath.

"I want to kill you," Will says.

Hannibal values honesty, and there is no truth more open than this one.

"That will be difficult for you," Hannibal says after a languorous pause. His breath tickles the damp hair at the back of Will's neck. "Why?"

Will's mouth is too dry to form the words fast enough, and Hannibal seems to read it as hesitation.

"Because doing bad things to bad people feels good?" Hannibal suggests. It's a mantra they both know, and Will is still cataloguing the many moments, signs and klaxons that his interactions with Hannibal included, that might have warned him about what Hannibal is. What he himself could be. It occurs to Will, with a familiar but discomfiting dread, that it's his self-revelations that still have Hannibal curious.

Will croaks an agreement. It's reductive, but sure.

As the wire is pulled from him, there's less to support his numb legs, with his hands still bound behind him and the pillar he'd sweated and bled into providing ill support.

"Or righteousness?" Hannibal suggests, unwrapping Will's neck, keeping a gloved hand on his chest to slow the forward tilt of Will's torn body. "You are still Jack's man after all, are you not?"

"No."

"He's distraught, you know," Hannibal adds, still fussing with binds.

Will does not want to think of Jack. To imagine him now would be to carry the burden of paternal disappointment. He is not Jack's man, because to Jack he is now a killer. He is a profile. He is a disappointment so profound that he is a wound deep in the flesh beneath Jack's steadfast exterior. Will's innocence in this is a redundant detail; Hannibal has told the world by now that it is so, and therefore it must be. The more he understands Hannibal, the more distant any concept of innocence feels, for either of them.

Will stretches his neck, tries to look to where Hannibal's voice is and catches a glimpse of his catheter tube. Gloved hands tilt his chin back to its starting position.

This feels like bartering with his own soul. Proving himself more than a problem to be disposed of when the time arrives, with the thinnest hope that the longer he prolongs this, the more opportunities he'll have to break free.

"There's no right or wrong," Will tells Hannibal, concentrating on balancing his weight on his deadened ankles. "Killing you won't be a moral act."

Hannibal allows Will to see him, then. Shadows dimming out all but his eyes, and for the first time since he arrived in this place, Hannibal appears surprised.

"I'll enjoy it," Will adds, heel skidding out beneath him, scrabbling for purchase which only comes when Hannibal rights him again. An unsubtle reminder of where the power truly sits in the exchange, of how distant retribution might be. Will hears the dim echo of the words he's spoken and finds that he believes them, entirely.

Will can read Hannibal in this moment. A glimmer of uncertainty, and of hopefulness. And then, fast as disappearing courage, there's cruelty.

He's behind Will again, speaking low into his ear.

"*And here I thought you simply wanted revenge.*"

Now Will is uncertain. He hasn't held enough value in himself to believe in revenge for his own sake, and surely Hannibal would not think Will attached enough to Marissa, to his doctor, to Georgia, even, to bring about a reckoning, unless he's been underestimated. He tells Hannibal as much, in a voice that betrays his confusion. He barely notices that Hannibal is leaning his own body against his to keep him standing, or that he's torn the skin of his hands afresh, blood spooling lightly from the last length of wire still stuck to him.

"Abigail," Hannibal explains, except her name sounds like a cold, brittle curse.

The reason Jack would no longer be chasing her. Will had thought, believed, wished – that Hannibal simply meant that Jack would be too busy. That Will had been blamed for Nick Boyle's death, too. In for a penny, in for a pound. Except. Except it couldn't be that simple, could it? Because Jack still knew about those other girls. That wouldn't go away, until Abigail went away.

"She was your last, Will."

Will makes a sound, something startled and desperate. A gape of the vulnerability he wanted to deprive Hannibal of.

There is a pause, and then a needle. In the few moments before consciousness is taken from him, Will believes he could commit Hannibal's crimes threefold if it would only bring her back. Perhaps, his dimming conscience tells him, Hannibal was right after all.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and for your encouragement! Poor Will indeed.
Next chapter will follow in a few days x

3

Chapter Notes

In which Will experiences something like respite (almost).

3 -

The air smells of grass. Sweet flowers. Carnations? Something sicklier. Something softer. Then, disinfectant. Plastic.

“Good evening, Will.”

Will’s eyes open to too-bright lights. There is soft music playing – something he dimly recognises. Beethoven? He can’t home in on the melodies to track the sound back to his memory, because Hannibal is speaking again.

“You must be hungry,” Hannibal says in the voice of a gentleman. He takes form as Will’s eyes adjust, looming above him with a tray.

Will is starving. He is seated, and the room around him has not changed, except for his lowered vantage point. The pressures and aches in his body have migrated to his hips, his spine. His hands – laid out on the heavy wooden arm of the chair, each wrist meticulously bandaged – are unbound, as are his legs.

He thinks again of fevered dreams, and were it not for the bandages, he’d almost believe those hours spent pinned in ribbons of metal to be a hallucination. He is in Hannibal’s home, after all. His safe place. Except Hannibal is no longer his refuge; his announcement of Abigail’s sacrifice to the ruse having removed any hope that Hannibal may yet have any good intentions to share.

“Please,” Hannibal says, the tray pulling into focus and within reach of Will’s shaking hands.

It takes Will leaning on the arm of the chair to soften the growing burn of his spine to show him exactly what his new limitations are. The thing stopping him from lunging from the chair and wrapping his hands tight across Hannibal’s carotid. This new restraint is solid, colder than his cool skin, and wrapped in an arc across Will’s neck. He doesn’t do Hannibal the honour of fumbling with the fittings of this collar; his clavicle is bearing its weight, and when he moves to accept the tray, his neck – also bandaged – finds its broad embrace. He turns his attention to the goods on the tray, playing his part in Hannibal’s performance of normality.

“Soup,” Hannibal begins, listing the many exotic and fantastical ingredients that have gone into the dish.

“Thank you,” Will says, instead of *fuck you*.

To his annoyance, the soup is delicious. It’s warming, not too hot. It soothes his sore mouth and for a moment, he feels as though he is somewhere he belongs. It’s not until he looks down to the bowl and catches a view of the still-present drip and catheter pouch that his situation becomes unpleasantly present once again. The unmistakeable texture of bandages across his chest, his waist, his legs – everywhere those tiny steel coils tore holes into him, all hidden beneath clothes that do not belong to him but are fitted to his form perfectly. His jaw feels tight, stinging.

Hannibal is speaking again, and this time he’s giving Will the details of the manhunt that will never succeed. How Will is believed to have fled West, of the growing insecurity of Jack’s position within the FBI. Of Beverley Katz, and how her grim professionalism gathered the fibres pronouncing Will’s guilt, despite the grief it cost her. Hannibal tells Will that he thinks Katz is *quite marvellous*.

Will does not demand that Hannibal pull her name from his deadly mouth, and instead finishes his soup, resting the tray on his thighs.

“You haven’t killed me yet,” Will states. “Why?”

Hannibal doesn’t flinch, scooping the tray from Will’s lap with the flourish of a Michelin chef.

“Why do you think?” Hannibal asks pleasantly.

Will shifts in the chair, as much as he can without chafing the still sore skin of his neck.

“You can’t *display* me, yet,” Will suggests. “A corpse can’t be blamed.”

Hannibal smiles in gentle encouragement.

“If you show them me, you have to show them you. It’s a waiting game. I’m here for as long as your human mask stays in place, until one of them sees what you are.”

“Why would I not just dispose of you?” Hannibal asks. “Give you an ordinary death. Fake a suicide. They would believe it.”

Will knows they would. But he knows Hannibal, too. At least a part of him.

“You wouldn’t do anything so ordinary,” Will asserts, confidence growing incrementally. “I’m one of your better achievements. Couldn’t pin your crimes on just anyone. You’d need to celebrate that. It would be *inelegant* otherwise.”

It still feels like therapy, almost. Except Will is starting to believe Hannibal his patient, and not the other way around – and confidence so bold may not help him. Conversations, then. Only, the stakes loom higher than their pleasant words.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal suggests, and there’s that cruelty back again, in the curl of his mouth, “there’s an altogether different reason.”

Will's eyes rest on a pad of paper resting on the metal worktop, and the scalpel-sharp pencil next to it. Teasing Hannibal seems like a dreadful impulse in the circumstances, but the words are out before he has the foresight to stop them:

"You don't want rid of me until you've filled the pages of your sketchbook?"

He did not believe Hannibal capable of something as obvious as a blush, but there's a definite change in the hue of Hannibal's skin. Will is certain that this will cause him regret, but the tiny delight in bringing Hannibal's composure down a notch is worth it. He hopes. He wonders if this is what flirting feels like.

"On the contrary," Hannibal answers, only now there is something snarling and proud behind his voice. "I wouldn't want to waste the meat so soon."

The air in the room solidifies, freezes in Will's lungs and ices his throat.

The meat.

The organs, missing.

Cassie Boyle's lungs.

The dinner parties. The surgical exactness of every dish. Protein scramble.

"Would you care for more soup, Will?" Hannibal asks, and all Will can do in response is flex his hands and swallow down the roiling nausea climbing up through his throat.

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When Will next dreams, he dreams of feasts. Of limbs carved from his trunk, until all that remains is a scream. His dreams warn him that perhaps, it would be best to remain asleep.

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4

4 -

Time slows, and speeds, and sometimes stops entirely. Will's only measure of it passing is in the removal of stitches and wound dressings – the effects of the barbed wire have now thinned to pinkish dents and roughened stretches of scar tissue – and in the titbits of information Hannibal deigns to share with him, offering him clues that the world outside continues to spin on its regular axis, whilst his own warps and upends. It is only small relief that his limbs remain his, and very much attached to him.

Hannibal's control over Will's physical situation is so profoundly absolute that at times, Will begins to believe him infallible, entirely. There has been no single moment where any form or retaliation, or escape, would be possible. Even in those rare moments where Will is afforded privacy, he's lacked the strength or mobility to use it in any meaningful way.

Except, Hannibal still has human parts. Feelings, even. Though not in the way such things are commonly understood. The human parts of Hannibal are the ones that sit awake, capturing the angles of Will's distress and rendering them in graphite, preserved in his sketchbook. Will believes, with some small degree of hope, that the human parts of Hannibal aren't yet ready to part with him.

In these times, Will remembers that Hannibal still has needs; that he's still prey to the need to be witnessed. Understood. *Seen*.

Hannibal is fallible after all.

Eventually, Will finds the place where Hannibal's armour is its thinnest: Mischa. The long-dead sister, and bearer of Hannibal's last acts as a human, before he transformed himself into the modern-day monstrosity that sits before Will in his perfectly assembled suit.

How did she taste?

Hannibal is not blind to Will's attempts at manipulation, though the knowledge does not make him invulnerable.

Hannibal has no reply ready on his silver tongue. He sets a pâté in front of Will, the pretence of what it may contain no longer a secret for only one of them. Only the *who* remains a mystery.

"Eat, Will."

Will is back in the basement chair, and able to use the dainty fork to feed himself should he wish to. He does not wish. His stomach is concave and growling. Yet when Will eats what Hannibal serves him, it will not be for hunger's sake, it will be for Hannibal's. And Hannibal hasn't earnt it yet.

“Which parts, Hannibal?”

Hannibal looks away in mock distaste. Will knows it to be false, because Hannibal is energised by this petty pushing. Galvanised.

“Did her skin get trapped in your teeth?” Will continues. “Is it still there now, flavouring all these others? How does this,” he gestures to the pâté, “compare, Hannibal?”

Will doesn’t see Hannibal move. He only feels the residual ache, the smart of knuckles against his cheek. He’s smiling, as much as he can smile with one of Hannibal’s hands pulling his jaw down, the other guiding a forkful of the pâté into Will’s open mouth.

“Perhaps you could guess,” Hannibal tells him, returning to his seat opposite Will and smoothing the legs of trousers. The attempt at composure is far less convincing than before.

Will swallows, reluctantly; spitting seems one taunt too far. There are limits to what Hannibal will tolerate.

“Finish that and you can have desert, Will.”

Will only smiles back at Hannibal, with teeth. He hopes some limits yet remain.

“Or, I can leave you here. Until you’ve drunk that dry,” Hannibal suggests, gesturing towards the pouch leading from the catheter tube.

Will doesn’t doubt the threat, but denies Hannibal his revulsion and changes the subject, placing the small plate on the arm of the chair.

“Did you eat Abigail, too?”

The room stills. Hannibal looks undecided about how to respond. The space feels smaller, less intimidating, just for a moment.

“No.”

Will chews the answer, opens his mouth to ask why not.

“Goodnight, Will.”

Hannibal leaves with the swiftness of a man whose last limit has been breached.

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4.5 -

Will learns why Hannibal had not chosen to eat Abigail some waves of conscious and unconsciousness later. He’s dehydrated, and likely starving – the unfinished pâté now

smelling faintly aggressive, and the swollen pouch containing his drained piss looking desperately tempting. He's almost impressed that Hannibal let it get this far. Except, he's distantly aware that he doesn't want to die here. He's already close enough to death that Hannibal doesn't register the imperceptible differences between his waking and sleeping postures.

Will doesn't flinch when Hannibal rests a hand beneath his nostrils to monitor the thready breaths, and his pulse feels dim as defeat when Hannibal places two fingers above the steel of the collar to test it. It's not deliberate, this feigning. It's just that Will lacks the energy to do anything else.

To Will's heavy closed eyes Hannibal may be invisible, but he is not silent. He rustles as he moves through the space, a lullaby of susurration so rhythmic that Will almost fades back into the merciful blankness of sleep. Until the indistinct whisperings become tangible words; a soft voice, barely audible. Softer than Hannibal has any right to sound. At first, Will thinks he's murmuring to himself in gentle affirmations. Then, he wonders if the words are meant for him: commiserations about having to remain inside, hidden. About how it would ruin everything to be found now, and how patience is the most vital virtue. Except, there are pauses in Hannibal's words. Promises of a more optimistic end than any he's promised to Will. He's conversing.

We cannot be free until he is in the ground, Hannibal promises the distant voice.

I know, he says. *Not yet, sweet girl*, he tells the voice, and then there's quiet.

Sweet girl.

There's only one of those who could hold Hannibal to account, though he doubts the word sweet is a fair fit for Abigail.

Hannibal hums to himself for a few short minutes. The only remaining sounds beneath his delicate notes are the whirring of the freezer chest, the fussing of surfaces being cleaned, of the festering food being cleared away, and the unclasping of another needle.

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5

Chapter Summary

This is where some of the 'graphic' parts of the tag warnings come into their own.

5 -

Now, whenever now is in the passage of time and deepening dread, Hannibal is telling Will of how he is inviting Jack for a consolatory dinner. The consolation being for his early retirement. It's been a lengthy but ultimately unsuccessful investigation into the disappearance of the copycat killer, Hannibal tells Will.

Now, in this moment, Will is processing this information with his naked back pressed against the metal worktop in Hannibal's basement. He doesn't try to move; he knows he won't be able to. He knew he'd end up here, eventually. He just hoped it might have taken longer. He hoped that Hannibal might have confessed to lying about Abigail, about how she's alive and waiting for the moment of her liberation from a false grave. He'd hoped for many things, and chief among them is the wish to see if he really could have bested Hannibal, if given enough time.

His answer is the glint of a scalpel, and of many other steel tools beside.

Hannibal is in good spirits. There is music playing – Bach, this time. Will recognises this one.

Hannibal continues informing Will of the goings on outside this basement, as conversational as he's ever been. Will's silence thus far has not encouraged him to stop. Will listens to the saga of Freddie Lounds' success in writing the first book about Will, and about what a great pity it will be when Hannibal has to prove each gauchely written chapter to be false.

He listens to new recipes Hannibal is experimenting with. Hannibal pats Will's tummy at this; no longer hollow but still too tight. He'd not given Will the opportunity to take his food willingly after the pâté incident, nor had he risked further destruction of his body through starvation, resorting straight to a feeding tube. When Will ate voluntarily after its removal, it was not seen as the move of allegiance with Hannibal's lifestyle that Will had intended it to be, but an act of self-preservation.

Hannibal tells Will of how Alana has been visiting more frequently, of how her interest in Hannibal only seemed to pique the more he appeared to be grieving. He suspects, he says in the tone of a co-conspirator, that Alana may have a thing for wounded ducks.

"She'd love me right now, then," Will offers dryly.

Hannibal stops his fussing for a moment, as though surprised to find his future dinner talking back to him. His tone turns faintly sombre.

“Unfortunately for you, she finds your deeds too heinous to forgive.”

Hannibal splashes some sort of brownish liquid over Will’s torso, dabbing it with cotton.

“Forgiveness isn’t always a choice,” Will says, flinching as the tip of a scalpel catches the mid-point of his chest. “I’ve forgiven plenty from you,” he adds. Then, “Can I ask what it is you’re planning to do to me?”

Hannibal ponders this, injecting something clear next to the small incision. It mutes some of the sting.

“What have you forgiven?” Hannibal asks. “The deaths that Freddie has written about so gleefully?”

Will nods. “Most of them.”

Hannibal concentrates on Will’s flesh, not his words, for long enough to carve a vertical gash in the centre of Will’s chest, from heart to the base of his ribs. Will gasps – not numb enough, not nearly – watching red spill from the line into the valleys of his skin. Hannibal is fast to mop the spillage, and Will could imagine being fascinated by the surgical prowess of it all, were it not taking place on – *in* – his too-conscious body.

“Tell me what you can’t forgive, Will,” Hannibal asks, not taking his eyes from the next line he carves. This one is in a short curve reaching out from the centre, a graceful arc that matches the shape of the bone beneath it. He pats Will’s trembling shoulders in a redundant gesture of soothing.

“Abigail,” Will says through gritted teeth. The pain is sheet white, now. His fists are clenched, released, clenched again and doing nothing to alleviate the agony of his skin being sliced from his chest, this time in a mirror of the first arc. Like wings torn from his chest.

Hannibal continues to cut, the angles ever changing until the cutting becomes closer to peeling, and the mid-point of Will’s front rib cage lays exposed, folds of flesh pulled back, and the rest clinging sticky to the bone.

“I imagine what happened to her is the hardest to forgive,” Hannibal says as he pulls a broader blade into view. “She represented much more to you. She was almost our daughter, after all.”

Will suspects that Hannibal intends his words to be more painful than the excruciating surgery, but the blades are doing far more in that department. His breaths are coming out in shouts, in gasps and gulps. It takes multiple attempts, and for Hannibal to take his gloved hands *out of his rib cage*, until Will can correct him.

“I can only forgive. What you’ve – you’ve *actually done*.”

Will uses Hannibal's pause to pull more air into his lungs. To remember how to breathe. Except, he can see the rise of his chest in front of him, *all* of his chest, raw and full of bones and inflating and deflating, lungs spasming with Hannibal's deft fingers wrapped around his ribs, bloodied to the knuckle and *caressing* –

The oxygen helps.

Specifically, the swiftly applied oxygen mask obscures Will's view of anything but the plastic ridge above his nose, and the bright ceiling light above him. His nerves are trying to tell him the rest of the story, but they're all screaming it in unison and Will can no longer discern which agony stems from which bleeding open hole in him.

Hannibal does not ask Will how he knows – he'll have figured it out. Instead, he continues to work without words – sawing something, then snapping. Will screams into the mask, gasping in oxygen on the recoil of his lungs. Another snap. Then a third, and a fourth. Will's screams subside to hungry, urgent sobs as the sound of two heavy objects being dropped into a tin resonates through the room.

Survival be damned, if this is the price. Will is ready to accept death, now.

"If you know she is alive," Hannibal says, arranging yet more tubes around the cavity and readying needle and thread, "then you also know that her freedom depends on you having forsaken yours completely."

Will nods in a single jerk. He gulps more of the precious air, then speaks into the mask. He knows as much; after all, why else is he an open breathing cadaver on Hannibal's table? He can give up on himself, he thinks. He doesn't want to give up on *her*.

"You should let her go," he manages.

Hannibal is silent again. His agile fingers hover above the space where Will's fifth ribs once were, then delve beneath the tissue until they rest lightly on the muscles that pulse and contract in rapid rhythms.

It's appropriate, Will's heart in Hannibal's hands. And dear god, it burns.

The oxygen isn't enough to keep Will conscious through the prods and explorations of his insides. He can't pinpoint where inside him Hannibal is through touch alone, but he wakes again to Hannibal's hand in front of him, reddened to the wrist. Gloveless. When Hannibal puts a finger to his own mouth and sucks, Will closes his eyes and pleads with his body to let him sit the rest of this one out.

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5.5 –

Will awakens, still on the table. It's different, now. Softer. There's a sheet over him, up to the shoulders, and this does not help him feel any less like a corpse.

"Jack will be arriving shortly," Hannibal tells him, patting the cushion that now supports Will's aching head. "I feel I don't need to tell you that if you make a noise, his throat will be opened before he can reach for his gun, and that your penance will be violently unpleasant."

Will is still marvelling the fact that he is, regrettably, very much alive, too much to call Hannibal out on his definitions of unpleasant things. There is a tube feeding air into a mask, and contours of others beneath the sheets. All of him feels opened, filled, rearranged and stuffed back into someone else's order.

"You don't. Need to tell me," he says.

Hannibal looks pleased. Buoyant, even.

"Thank you," he says, as though Will's acquiescence to not getting Jack killed is a small favour between friends. "I've made his favourite dish, and it would be a shame to ruin it."

It's a prompt. Will needs to deliver the next line, to allow Hannibal to speak his. They're back to playing pleasantries, it seems.

"What is Jack's favourite meal, Hannibal?"

Will braces for the list of extravagant ingredients and preparations. Instead, his answer comes in two short syllables, as Hannibal turns out the lights.

"Braised rib."

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6

6 -

Will's recovery from surgery is not without pain, and for all the substances Hannibal slips inside him through needles, gas, and once in his drink, none of them appear to dull anything but Will's consciousness. The stitches in his chest seem to stretch with each breath, and his heart no longer feels like it belongs to him alone, the memory of Hannibal's fingertips caressing the weary muscle now imprinted on it, fully.

He is afforded more comfort, now. His reward, perhaps, for lying in obedient silent agony as Hannibal and Jack had sat only metres above him, dining on the meat from his absent bones.

The more he plays along with Hannibal, entertaining conversations and complimenting the food, the more freedoms he is granted. His beard has been shaved. He's given books to read, and music to listen to. During the spells of time that Hannibal tells him are night, he is given a mattress – plush, and well bedded – to sleep on, in the corner of the vast underground space behind the plastic curtaining. His only tether remains as a loop of steel around his ankle, with some metres of chain linking it to the wall, lest he climbs his way out of his new home. His catheter is removed – eventually, and painfully – and he is given a glass jug to piss in.

And in the times after Hannibal bids him good morning, he is granted an elongation of the chain, the tools to dispose of his urine, and access to a tiny closed space in the basement containing a lavatory and a sink. He is reassured that full bladder control will return in time, but that the tubing had been a necessary addition.

Despite the petty humiliations, despite the pain and stark reminders of the power imbalances that remain between them, Will finds that he is beginning to enjoy both himself, and Hannibal's company.

He thinks of Abigail in these times. Wonders if she's in the same gentle purgatory, waiting for the devil to finally beckon her to his embrace. And then, as the light from the stars is drawn to the crush of the black hole, his attention is dragged fully and inescapably back to Hannibal.

They have conversations, now. Though some subjects remain unspoken, Will is granted the space to hold opinions. They speak of theoretical things, of good and evil and the vast contradictions within. Hannibal offers glimpses of the world beyond the basement, too. When Hannibal speaks of Alana, he speaks only of a fond acquaintance, leading Will to wonder if she'd begun to sense the breadth of Hannibal's nature and had backed away of her own accord. He hopes so, and forgets to envy her freedom. When Hannibal speaks of Jack, it's similarly distant. He's little more to him now than a future guest at a dinner party. A welcome one, though; Hannibal tells Will how invigorating it is to have someone appreciate his cooking so enthusiastically, and he smiles when Will rests a protective hand over the stinging cavity of his chest.

Will is dimly aware of himself changing beneath Hannibal's inscrutable gazes, beneath his perfunctory acts of care, and under those reassuring touches more tender than they deserve to be. He doesn't know who – or what – he is changing into, only that it is inevitable, like the evolution that first brought fish out of the sea, to take their first gasping breaths on the shoreline.

6.5 -

The stalemate of pleasantries is not sustainable.

Today, Hannibal brings him a heady platter of truffles, tartare and a plum jus, sits opposite Will at his modest basement table, and watches contentedly as Will eats.

"I'm pleased to see your appetite remains healthy," Hannibal says.

"I'd still prefer to know *who*," Will says between mouthfuls. "This seems particularly fresh."

"They were not from your old life, if that is what you mean," Hannibal assures him. "Would it change the flavour for you, if you knew them?"

Will doesn't want to think about this in detail. He imagines there are some who could yet cause him to choke. He shrugs and is careful to throw in another compliment about the meal. He doesn't want to appear ungrateful for the segment of life between his jaws. It is delicious, after all.

"Where do you prepare them, now? I'm occupying your prep area."

"Only one of them," Hannibal answers. The bolder Will becomes, the more pleased he seems in response.

Will chews thoughtfully. Then, "Is Abigail still in one of them?"

They haven't spoken of her since Will's surgery, since he told Hannibal that the ruse of her death had failed, for him. Hannibal nods, the gentle delight falling from his features to be replaced by a sensitive kind of gravity.

"You shouldn't take her with you," Will says. "When you go."

Hannibal's *why?* is needle sharp.

"She doesn't need another father," Will says plainly. He doesn't say *like Garrett Jacob Hobbs*. Doesn't say *like him*. "She's what, twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Age has little bearing of whether a person needs someone to guide them," Hannibal says, defensive.

“She doesn’t need your guidance, Hannibal. Or your protection.”

Hannibal’s posture stiffens.

“And you imagine you would have been a better influence on her? You were keen on teaching her how to fish, if I recall.”

Will opens his mouth to disagree, and is interrupted.

“Can you tell me with honesty that if someone were to wrong her, that you wouldn’t be the first to bring them down?”

“I’d *want* to tear the skin from their bones,” Will agrees. Sighs. He wanted so desperately to be her father, until he knew enough of who he was, and how unkind that would be. “But she knows how to do that, too. She might fare better learning less extreme means of self-preservation,” he suggests. He says the words as kindly as he can, as though the suggestion of *not murdering people* is something so blasphemous it must be softened. “She doesn’t get to do that with you. With either of us.”

It’s a direct attack on all that Hannibal is, and no matter how sweetly Will presents the words, they wound Hannibal. And Hannibal reverts to his most animalistic when injured.

“I think you’ve known this for some time, Hannibal,” Will continues, watching as the light is blinked from Hannibal’s eyes and his fingers flex beneath the hem of his shirt. This is going badly, but the sentiment is now a living thing. There is nothing more to be gained from pretending the words spoken don't carry meaning, nor that the ones which must follow can be ignored, and so Will continues. “Since I’ve been here. You’ve known that one day you’ll have to leave this behind, when they find you, and that day will come. Abigail knows enough to know how to keep on your living side –”

“Apparently more than you do –”

“It made sense, before you had me. You’re only keeping her because it’s too painful not to. She doesn’t *have* to depend on you – she’s smart, and young. She can be anyone, Hannibal. She can go anywhere. Don’t make her into Mischa.”

Will can almost hear the levee of Hannibal’s placidity break. The plate – not yet empty – crashes to the floor. It’s followed by the table, and then, on his back, Will. His skull throbs with the impact of the cold floor and there’s a bright hum of stars in his vision, swiftly replaced by Hannibal kneeling over him.

“Why,” asks Hannibal, one hand finding Will’s throat and steadily leaning his weight into it, “do you imagine that your being here has *any bearing on this*?” Hannibal asks.

Will *knows*. He knows, through the sketchbooks, and the lengthy conversations, and by virtue of his still being alive, that Hannibal has some need of him yet. If not as a protegee, then at least an emotional accomplice. Hannibal can disguise many things, but not his infatuation – grotesque as it might be.

He tries to speak, through the pressure. Whatever he needs to say, Hannibal isn’t ready to hear it yet. He swallows his answers and lets the air above him turn black.

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7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will is back in the collar chair. Except this time, his hands are secured to the broad arms, and his ankles won't move when he tries to stretch them.

His mouth feels like it's burning. Like he's been chewing wasps. He tastes alcohol, and blood. He opens his eyes to the cause of it, and there's a curved needle swaying in and out of his vision, held tight in Hannibal's long fingers.

He supposes that he had this coming.

The inevitable *this* pierces the skin above the bow of Will's lips. A sting, then a bloom of radiant, ice hot pain. The thread drags through the perforation like rope through drying cement. Screams start in the pit of Will's lungs, roar through his throat and stick in the seam of his half-sewn mouth.

The problem with baiting Hannibal, is that it's inevitable he'll end up in the jaws of the thing he tried to catch.

Hannibal continues as though Will's being conscious again has no bearing on his actions, repeating the motion. Puncture, pull, tighten, repeat. Respite comes with occasional pauses, for him to wipe the bloodied needle clean, and once, to rest a hand on Will's shoulder to soften the tremulous shaking of his body.

The process is long enough to allow Will the opportunity to explore the concept of regret; had he not made his plea for Abigail's future, he might in this moment be spared the indignity of trying, and failing, to hold back tears which turn into ugly, silent sobs. Had he bitten his tongue a little longer, not goaded Hannibal about his skewed fixation, he might not be trying not to swallow it now. Except, this is the bed of nails he's made for himself. Regret is redundant; he wouldn't have chosen to lie in it had he not thought he could at least tempt Hannibal to lie with him.

The final stitch is sewn and tied off. The tension is tested; not so tight that it distorts the line of Will's mouth, but firm enough that any attempt to speak will be entirely stoppered. Hannibal looks pleased. Severe, gently unbalanced and not without worry, but also satisfied.

The trembling continues some minutes after Hannibal disinfects his kit and tidies it away, standing back to appraise his work.

"I trust this gives you a better indication of your significance," Hannibal says.

It is meant as another injury to Will, but it tells Will far more. It tells him that his words have been effective tools, honing Hannibal's point of view some way to his own. If he were as inconsequential as Hannibal tells him he is, then there would be no need to mute him. To

Hannibal, the words of his victims are no more damaging than grass is to a lawnmower, yet Will's have been shut away like precious, lethal seeds. And, because Hannibal is Hannibal, he has chosen to mute Will in the most profoundly painful way he can imagine. Though, and this is little mercy in this precise moment, not permanently.

It doesn't feel hopeless. It just *hurts*.

Hannibal reaches for the waistband of Will's trousers, sighing at the widening of Will's eyes.

"Nothing so base," he says, bringing the wretched catheter fitting into view. Will shakes his head; he was mercifully unconscious the last time this was fitted to him. This time, every nerve in his urethra is keenly aware of the intrusion and he fully appreciates why he's been bound to near-stillness; had he not been, he'd have kicked Hannibal in the face by now. Repeatedly. He adds this to a mental checklist of things he would like to do as soon as the means and opportunities arise.

"This is preferable to you ruining the chair," Hannibal says unnecessarily.

Hannibal shears an even rectangle from Will's trousers, looping the tubing through it and attaching the bag so that it sits beneath his chair, taping it into place. Another pouch is attached to a needle in Will's arm – fresh and almost clear – and Will assumes this is the one that keeps him hydrated. Alive. Free to suffer the remaining indignities Hannibal intends to visit upon him. It tells him that this, however *this* escalates, is not to be short term. His tongue sits heavy and useless in his mouth.

Will wants to tell Hannibal that it's okay. That he knows. That he knows Hannibal's actions are simply those of a man afeared of hearing certain truths. That Will might be the one sewn up and tethered into place, but that Hannibal's own fears have him pinned almost as effectively.

His silence protects him, and Hannibal leaves, wordless as he turns out the light.

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Chapter End Notes

With apologies for a delayed update - isolation really is taking its toll on things like time.

Thank you for reading!

8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

8 –

Hannibal's next visit to the basement betrays a calmer demeanour. He bids Will a good afternoon, the gentle strains of Chopin twinkling through the clinical space. He changes tubes and pouches, and wipes at the crusts of red around Will's mouth where movement has drawn fresh blood from the stitches. He loosens the binds around Will's ankles – still keeping the rope in place, but increasing the range of motion to inches. Not enough to launch a heartfelt kick, but it's something. Kneeling between Will's legs, Hannibal begins massaging each leg from the ankles upward, through his trousers.

"To keep your circulation in order," he answers to a question Will cannot ask.

He repeats the same motion on Will's wrists and arms. It does nothing to disavow Will of the notion that he is being puppeteered, but he nods lightly – until his jaw finds the metal collar – as though he is offering his consent. Because that, somehow, still has to matter. He is still an equal, as long as he still *agrees* to allow Hannibal to do this to him.

Hannibal is pleasantly conversational as he smooths Will's clothing down. He talks of new clients he has taken on, only he speaks with the obliqueness of one who will not betray patient confidentiality. As though Will were in a position to call him on it. He continues talking as he draws up a chair – now the same height as Will, *equals* – and presents Will with dinner.

Dinner is a cup filled with murky liquid, with a juicebox-thin plastic straw. This is inelegant, even by standards far lower than Hannibal's. But, Will would willingly bite his own tongue to stave off the dehydration at this point, so it will do just fine. The straw is pushed, gently and then ungently, through two front stitches until Will's tongue finds it.

Will ignores the detail that Hannibal is feeding him, hand cupped beneath his chin to keep the meal in place. He ignores the stinging of his dry lips scratched by the straw, and the heaviness of his tongue, and he ignores the scrutinous gaze that Hannibal has fixed upon him. He drinks, out of thirst, out of obedience, and to demonstrate that he's *willing*. He's lying on his bed of nails with pride.

And because he's mute, he doesn't interrupt his meal to taunt Hannibal about his compulsion for control. He drinks until the straw sucks on air.

Hannibal doesn't offer more, and Will cannot ask for it.

“I met the new head of Behavioural Science,” Hannibal says as he clears the cup and straw away. He tells Will that this new version of Jack is a sour-faced man named Anders, with no appreciation of the vigour his line of work affords him.

Will raises an eyebrow, an invitation for elaboration. They are conversing, after all.

“Perhaps I should invite him to dinner,” Hannibal says. “Perhaps it’s too personal. A dinner party?”

For a moment, he looks profoundly disappointed at Will’s silence, despite being the entire cause of it.

Will waits for more – for news of the rest of the Quantico team, for Hannibal’s plans of what to put on the menu, but nothing else follows. For a moment, Will feels something like pity; Hannibal is no longer ingratiated into the investigations he’d revelled in – at least, not on the side of the law. He’s scrabbling for entertainment, lethal as it may be. He’s an outsider again; unseen and now unanswered.

Will thinks of what he might say, if he could. If he’d tempt Hannibal back to the rational – tell him to keep a low profile, uphold the façade. Except, there’s no joy in a stalemate. Of stasis. Perhaps, instead, he’d invite the hell Hannibal so desperately wants to raise; encourage Hannibal to burn this life to embers and forge something new in its wake. Except, he doesn’t want to burn with it. He wants to be the thing that rises from the ashes.

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8.5 –

On the next visit, Hannibal cuts the rope from Will’s ankles, hovering his wrists above them to ensure Will doesn’t use the opportunity to kick him. Despite the overwhelming temptation, Will concedes and lets his legs rest numb and still. His wrists are freed next, and again Will offers no violent retaliation, only flexes and rubs at them until they feel like his own again.

He cannot thank Hannibal in words, but lowers his eyes in what he hopes is a gesture of gratitude as the collar is unlocked and his aching head tilts forward.

He lets Hannibal scoop up the tubing still threaded into him, attaching it to a trolley, and guiding Will to the tiny cubicle that has served as his approximate bathroom.

The music – an unfamiliar piece, this time – grows louder as Will closes the door behind him. His modesty is being preserved, he supposes. As much as it can be, all things considered.

He weighs up the things he could achieve in this rare moment of apparent freedom. There is nothing in the cubicle bar tissue, a toilet and a sink, and though he’s read One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s nest, he does not believe he is up to paying tribute by tearing the latter from the wall. Though, the idea of braining Hannibal with a crown of porcelain isn’t completely

unwelcome, if only for the mundanity of it. The trolley with his fluids, then. Except it's too cumbersome, and the pole is not the detachable kind. He briefly imagines dousing Hannibal with saline and piss and accepts that a heroic escape is not something he will manage today. Or the next day.

He's aware, dimly, that he's only imagining his escape because he owes it to some former incarnation of himself; a version of himself that believed in the concept of freedom, without understanding what it meant. The earlier version of himself that convinced himself that a murder within the realms of law enforcement was any different to the kind Hannibal commits. A version of himself with a life that no longer exists. His present day self, with his sewn up mouth and skin made out of scars, has a better grasp on his new reality.

When he emerges again, thoroughly washed hands and his trolley trailing obediently behind him, Hannibal is waiting.

Will hadn't known that lockable gloves existed until this moment, and he ponders the types of shops or websites Hannibal would have had to visit in order to source them. If he were able to speak, he is certain he could poke a few dents into Hannibal's demeanour for this alone. Perhaps, it's better in this moment that he's still rendered voiceless. Hannibal's wrath may have subsided, but not enough to risk the freedom of his tongue. This isn't punishment; it's containment.

"I've given some thought to what you said," Hannibal tells Will as he pulls one leather glove over Will's willingly presented right hand. Will raises an eyebrow. He hasn't *said* anything since the needle and thread came out; that was rather the point.

"Abigail is a resourceful young woman," Hannibal continues. "In the right environment she could flourish."

Will's stomach clenches at the mention of her name. It's something like hope, and a deep profound fear. He understands Hannibal's capacity for cruelty in an intensely intimate way, and pleads inwardly that this brutality does not extend to her. She is far more than the means of punishment for his misdeeds.

He nods agreement as the wrist of the glove snaps into place like a singular handcuff, a small padlock adding more to the design than the security of it.

"Perhaps it was arrogant of me to make that environment into a cage," Hannibal continues. It is some moments of fiddling with the left glove until he makes eye contact with Will, and Will is careful to reciprocate. The clench in Will's stomach grows stronger.

"I had wanted…" Hannibal says, the words pushing out of him like treacle. "…For us to be a family."

Will knows this. They almost had been, in the days before Will had been burdened with the terrible knowledge of who Hannibal is. Who Abigail is. Who he thinks he might be.

"I believed that if you could understand her, you might have…"

He tails off, and Will wants to answer that he *does*. That he is here, and alive, because he understands precisely what Hannibal is. And that try as he might to pretend otherwise, he is inextricably caught up in that. That his fantasies of escape are routine daydreams, but that the reality of a life beyond Hannibal is no longer tangible. That there is something in him that envies Hannibal's freedom to be himself, knowing how far the depths of that self go.

He can only nod, laying his gloved hands open to Hannibal in a gesture of acceptance. Hannibal studies him, unreadable again.

Hannibal pulls the chain from the corner of the room and guides Will to his mattress. His reward, he supposes. Will sits and leans his ankle out for Hannibal to secure the chain around. He feels like a well-trained animal.

"It is rare that I let anyone see me, Will," he says.

Will wants to ask if he let Abigail see him, too. See all of him.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal asks, standing so that Will has to crane his neck to see all of him. "Do you still wish to kill me?"

If Will could smile, he would. His urge to kill Hannibal has not necessarily been diminished – there is still merit in purging him from the world after all, and it may be the only way to guarantee his survival. If nothing else, he owes him pain. It's just that it sits in stark contradiction to his compulsion to know him. To see him, and be seen by him. He answers Hannibal with a tilt of his head, and a deliberate roll of his neck, halfway between a nod and a shake. His eyes don't break contact with Hannibal's, and he hopes the spark he feels at the question is as vivid to Hannibal as it feels to him.

Hannibal steps back, nodding.

"Then I have a difficult decision to make. Goodnight, Will."

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading (and for the beautiful feedback). The last few bits of editing are taking their sweet time as work is rinsing me right now, but the final part should be up in about a week. Thank you for your patience x

9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though the stitches holding Will's mouth closed are stretching and slackening, Will has made no moves to tear them open. By now, his muteness is more of a punishment for Hannibal than for him. He's sown all the seeds he can, and all that remains is for Hannibal to choose which of them to reap, and which to allow to bloom.

Will wonders if the puncture wounds will scar. He hopes not.

He's made peace with the lines of fleshy scarring running thick across his chest; a cross with bowed arms, and a soft space beneath where his internal armour got cut away. His lungs, his heart, almost within reach now. Exposed. Vulnerable. He wonders bleakly if Hannibal finds the notion romantic, and settles on *probably*. If he could speak, he'd ask Hannibal if he kept the bones of his ribs, picked clean in his dinner with Jack. He doesn't need to ask; he settles on *definitely*.

He pats at the skin with his locked gloves, feels the sinking indent of his stomach and considers that perhaps, he is hungrier than he first realised.

The light changes; the comforting glow that signals company. Will looks up with expectation, or maybe obedience; something in his reaction feels trained. He finds he doesn't mind.

Hannibal enters the basement with the burden of one who holds secrets, decisions, and the power of a god. What he lacks is the familiar delight that should accompany such weight. No fun playing God if the consequences hurt, maybe? He had a decision to make. Two decisions, really. To set Abigail upon the world to forge a path beyond Hannibal's greedy shadow, or to hold her close and keep her. And, what to do with Will.

Decisions so great are made by forces bigger than words, and so Will waits in silence for Hannibal to settle next to him on the mattress, and speak.

"Sunlight can change a person's appearance a great deal," Hannibal begins. His eyes look ahead at the white wall, not at Will. "Beyond pigmentation of the skin," he continues, "the light under which we first view a person can shape our most lasting perception of them."

Will doesn't follow, yet. He thinks of the yellow-grey light of the basement and is thankful that there is no one but Hannibal to view him here.

"She has always been wintery in our eyes, I think," Hannibal says.

Will turns to him, then. Searches his face for meaning, or warmth, and finds none.

"She'll adapt," Hannibal continues, and Will feels the soft organs in his skin knotting and unfolding with a deep yearning tug of hope. "She'll find new family, who may even believe

her to simply be an ordinary young woman," Hannibal says, and rests a hand over Will's gloved one.

Hannibal is mourning, and Will allows him his misery as his own heart swells in relief.

"She's gone, Will. As free as you wanted her to be. No forwarding address, just…California. It's all we agreed. Are you pleased?"

It's the closest Will has felt to joy since…since before he met Hannibal. He is more than pleased. No matter what happens from here, Abigail's freedom is his victory. His mouth pulls with the effort of trying to suppress his smile and his eyes water; all he can do is to place a gloved hand on Hannibal's thigh in a gesture of gratitude.

Hannibal reacts the way a statue reacts; cold and still as marble. Will doesn't move.

"This is not sustainable," Hannibal points out. Then, distantly, "Florence is beautiful this time of year."

Will doesn't know what this time of year is; whether the snow has thawed and cleared the way for bluebells, whether summer is in full bloom, or whether the air is turning crisp and golden. The basement remains the same temperature, and the light only changes with Hannibal.

"I have a pilot friend who owes me a favour," Hannibal adds, and Will isn't sure he wants to know what emotional blackmail Hannibal could hold over someone that may make chartering a private plane a viable option.

Will wants to tell Hannibal that he could sail him there, if he wished it. He's almost grateful for the stitches this time; he fears Hannibal has yet to accept that he could need Will after all, and a truth so large could cost him his tongue.

Will only then remembers to be shocked at how pleasant he found the fantasy of running away with Hannibal. He'd envisioned their cohabitation on a boat, arrival in a country he's never seen, and the first steps of their coexistence, before the detail that he owes Hannibal violence catches up to him.

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9.5 –

There's a familiar sound of footsteps padding down the stairs to Will's basement nest, and then the less familiar sound of something heavy being dragged behind them.

"Good evening, Will," says Hannibal through exerted breaths.

Will stands on cue, stepping through the plastic curtaining – the full length the chain on his ankle permits – and nods a greeting in return. The *something heavy* looks up through drowsy eyelids as Hannibal drapes it across the steel table.

“I’ve brought a guest,” Hannibal explains.

Hannibal’s guest lurches without coordination and is swiftly flattened back onto the table with a heavy hand. The clothes of this stranger have a familiarity to them which his lined face mercifully does not – thin tie, starched trousers and shirt, all cocooning the body of a man who undergoes regular fitness tests, the kind that his time behind a desk will rarely give him the opportunity to use. He’s FBI.

Will hopes his expression is question enough.

“This was always a likely possibility,” Hannibal says, making peace with the finality that this new victim signifies.

Hannibal tethers the man’s limbs to the table with plastic straps, propping him up with a box beneath his head so that he and Will remain within his line of sight.

“It seems that Jack’s replacement was able to make some connections that his predecessor missed,” Hannibal says, and this is bad. This is very bad. If this is Anders, the new head of behavioural science, then there is likely very little time for a clean escape.

“Will,” Hannibal says, only it’s posited as a question.

Will nods. Anything. He is fully prepared to do anything, if it will get them – him – out of this.

Anders tugs at his bonds and slurs something unintelligible. Hannibal places a flannel between his teeth and places his attention fully on Will, pulling the tiny chair in Will’s living space out and motioning for Will to sit on it.

“Mr Anders has seen you now,” Hannibal says in a low voice. “He knows that you are alive, and he knows you to be my prisoner.”

Will nods – this is apparent, but redundant. This Mr Anders will likely be dead within the hour.

“I set Abigail free,” Hannibal says, and Will hopes Hannibal can see how much he has been changed. “I could yet set you free, too.”

A one-time reprieve from the Ripper is believable; Abigail was never Hannibal’s victim after all. But Will is…if not his victim, then somehow, emphatically, still *his*.

“Mr Anders could survive his ordeal, living to proclaim your innocence,” Hannibal says.

Will wants to say that he does not feel innocent, now. Not after eating at Hannibal’s table, knowing if not who, then what he was eating. He doesn’t feel innocent when he’s still haunted by the euphoria of killing a man, albeit within the realms of the law. And he doesn’t

feel innocent when he fantasises of the many deaths he wants to visit upon Hannibal. And upon the people like him. And when he thinks of how he's still rooting for Hannibal to make it out of this unscathed, his guilt only multiplies. The proclamation of his innocence has no value to him, now.

"Do you want that, Will?" Hannibal asks, and his back is turned as he pulls scissors and gloves from a drawer, giving Will time to consider his answer.

Hannibal doesn't face Will until he has brought a second chair over, and is sat opposite him, scissors, tweezers, cloths and alcohol laid on the table between them.

The shake of Will's head is definite, and strong as the stare he fixes Hannibal's face with. Hannibal will need to know why.

Hannibal only nods, cups the back of Will's head to cut the first stitch of Will's lips, then drags the thread through the puncture with tweezers. The pain seems amplified, as though the cells of Will's flesh had accepted the thread as permanent and has been steadily clinging to it. The next stitch is cut, and Will considers pleading that Hannibal just leave the thread where it is, aesthetics be damned. Except he won't, because *if* he's intent on belonging to Hannibal, then this is just part of the cost.

"I trust you will tell me why you no longer want to claim your virtue," Hannibal says, as a low whine escapes the growing partition between Will's lips. His face is close – so close that each fresh cut thread moves in the wake of Hannibal's warm breaths

Will nods, and more threads are cut, and pulled. He needs Hannibal to know that this is something far beyond mere acquiescence. He needs Hannibal to hear what he tried to tell him before he got sewn silent. He tastes the blood spotting at each exit point, and air, and it tastes like *him*. Hannibal keeps his hand at the base of Will's skull as he pulls the last stretch of thread through his torn mouth.

Will doesn't think. He leans forward, and it only takes inches to broach the distance, and places his bloodied, swollen lips on Hannibal's. He has meant very few kisses in his life, but this one is as urgent as breathing. Hannibal's stillness nearly stops him, nearly feels like regret, until it isn't stillness. Will's head isclasped in place with two warm hands as his kiss is allowed to linger, and is met with gentle reciprocity. Only their lips touch but it feels like *enough*.

The moment passes and they sink away from each other, Hannibal only faintly bewildered.

Will still has much to say. Not to explain himself – if Hannibal doesn't understand *that*, then he understands nothing. But Will was tasked with making a decision. His mouth is an uncomfortable combination of bloodied tingling, numbness and swelling, and after so long mute his words feel dry and heavy in his mouth.

"I don't have the virtue you speak of," he tells Hannibal in distorted words. "I'd only be playing at innocence. Until they saw what I was, too."

Hannibal regards him carefully, pulling Will's left hand toward him and toying with the mechanisms on the glove. "You are not like me," he points out.

"No," Will agrees. "But I am not unlike you either." Each word hurts, each consonant forming new pressures and frictions on the fresh wounds. He pushes forward. "You knew that, the first time you saw me blowing holes into Garrett Jacob Hobbs. You've always known."

"I hoped," Hannibal admits. The man on the table groans.

"I'm no picture of *victimised innocence* to him after that, either," Will adds, and Hannibal looks pleased. The glove is peeled off, leaving flecks of the lining stuck to Will's sweaty hands. He offers his right to Hannibal.

"So he is to die after all," Hannibal says, gesturing to the table and dutifully unclasping the second glove.

Will shrugs. "Unless you want to preserve what he's borne witness to." He pauses in thought, watching as his right hand is pulled free from its confinement. "I have no desire to see him dead. But I won't plead for him."

Hannibal seems satisfied by this. Will sets to wiping his hands with alcohol, periodically pressing his lips together to reacquaint himself with the sensation of being able to part them again, after. The residual taste of Hannibal on them is not unwelcome. Hannibal returns to the table, and to the man pleading through the flannel. He looks invigorated.

"Would you feel more strongly if I told you he was terribly rude?" Hannibal calls across the basement.

Despite having the use of his voice, Will is satisfied to answer this with just a look.

"I hear he did not like dogs very much, Will," Hannibal adds, moving with the graceful glee of one who has been gifted their very heart's desire.

Hannibal opens and closes drawers, apparently deciding on which implements to use on Mr Anders, as Will begins dabbing his mouth with alcohol and wincing at the sting.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal says, advancing through the plastic curtaining towards Will, "was that," meaning *the kiss*, "to stop me from killing you?"

"No," Will says, and means it. "It…made more sense to do it, than to not do it."

Hannibal has the expression of someone who is waiting for something more. He kneels next to Will's legs, reaching into his pocket.

"If I set you free, will you try and kill me?" he asks, looking up at Will.

Will allows himself a smile, then. He imagines it as something monstrous; his mouth swollen and dotted with punctures, but it feels whole and sincere. He raises his hands, as though to

demonstrate that the opportunity to do so has been present for longer than Hannibal credits him with.

“No,” Will says again. “Not now. Not now that I finally find you interesting.”

The lock clicks open. Hannibal unloops the metal from Will’s ankle, and stands. If Will were to renege on his statement, he should at least be ready.

Will only tells him *thank you*.

“Could you kill him?” Hannibal asks.

This feels final. Like the last chance Will has to prove himself as Hannibal’s man, clearly and vividly in all the ways Hannibal wants. Needs, maybe, if he ever admitted it. And truthfully, Will doesn’t know if he could. This man has not wronged him; he is only the means to ends which aren’t entirely his. Hannibal is not content with Will’s silence.

“Kill him the way you’d kill me.”

Will imagines it, for a moment. Sees himself climbing up on the table, straddling the man with no weapon beyond his own hands. Imagines sinking them into Hannibal’s neck, sees himself punching the gentle smile from Hannibal’s face until it becomes a hungered, bloodied grin. Sees his own knuckles cut raw on Hannibal’s face, and feeling the heat between them growing teeth, until he feels a hunger of his own. Feels his fingers reaching through Hannibal’s ribs the way his had reached through his own, taking hold of his heart and squeezing until it burst. Feels his teeth sinking into the meat of Hannibal’s neck until he tastes blood. And then he feels the space; the gap where Hannibal’s life once was, and feels something akin to a loss so profound he does not know that the words for it exist.

The stranger on the table hasn’t earned that from him.

“No,” Will tells Hannibal for the third time. “Not that way. Not yet.”

The air around them has the weight of a storm, in the seconds before lightning strikes. Even Anders refrains from groans or pleas, seemingly resigned to his fate.

Hannibal’s fingers find their way to the back of Will’s neck, curling towards the space beneath his ear and resting, firm, on the veins. It’s a threat, or warning, or just possession, and it’s grotesquely tender. Will remains stock still. Only his eyes move, catching Hannibal’s and waiting for something to reveal itself beneath the hoods of his eyelids. There’s nothing, for long moments; a well of oil and black.

“Very well.”

Hannibal doesn’t sound disappointed when he says it; more as though some great hunger within him has been appeased.

Will knows now, as much as he can know anything, that Hannibal will not kill him. Not at this juncture. And finally, Hannibal understands this, too. If he were done with Will by now, he wouldn’t have had to sew his mouth shut, nor cut it back open for want of his company.

Hannibal understands this, because he has to. He understands it, because he doesn't need to be alone in the world, now. The hand on the back of Will's neck recedes gracefully, lingering over the curve of Will's shoulders, trailing down his arm and softening with each descending inch. Will feels for a moment like a pet being stroked, and resists any instinct to bristle. He basks instead in the acceptance, and nods at the truce not fully spoken.

"Take a bath, Will," Hannibal says gently. "It's a long flight." And then, "I'll leave some clothes out for you when I'm finished here."

Will gifts him another smile. He takes the steps from the basement – the only space he's known since this started – into Hannibal's home.

His futures are spinning around him with each ascending step. He could still flee.

He's free. No wires or collars or lengths of chain to keep him in place. This is the moment he'd fantasised about in those long cold hours bleeding into wires, choking on the steel collar, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth lest he suffocate behind his sewn mouth. His *opportunity*.

Except the freedom he pined for is a fiction, predicated on him being a person who no longer exists. The Will he is now doesn't belong in those spaces occupied by morality, by kindness and virtue. He could run, but he'd be running from the only thing that made sense to him.

His feet guide him to Hannibal's bathroom, the tiles cool beneath his bare feet.

There's still vengeance. After so much pain endured at Hannibal's strong hands, it should be inevitable. The motive and means exist in abundance; Hannibal's house holds an arsenal of elegant weaponry, from the obvious knives of his kitchen, to the wardrobe burdened with paisley ties made strong enough for strangulation.

He steadies himself with a hand on the rim of the bathtub, his muscles unfamiliar with so much movement, and turns on the tap.

He may have been long steeped in righteous fury, but there's no galvanising force left in him to use it. It's enough to simply lift his arms to peel the remains of his dirty clothes from him. He *could* raise a fist, if he needed to. Except he doesn't think he needs to. Not now, not yet. The residue of Hannibal is still hot on his mouth, still etched into his hollowed ribs. That seems more insidious than anything else within him right now – the violent, lethal fondness that would be harder to let go of than any imagined freedom.

He toes his discarded shirt and trousers to the corner of the bathroom, and steps into the swelling water before he notices that his body had decided his fate long before his mind did.

Florence will be kinder to him, perhaps.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and for being so very patient with this last update.

The comments on this have been incredible and I'm sorry I've been sparse at replying - but thank you. They've been a source of absolute joy at a time where [gesturing at everything in the world rn] that's kinda rare? It's impressive and it means a lot.

I'd promise a sequel except I know how slow I am with this sort of thing - so this grim little tale of acceptance is its own little island for now. But, I'm always open to conversations about Will Suffering Terribly on the bird app, as @ muffichka

x

End Notes

Story has been written in full - chapters will update every few days. Thank you for reading!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!